



State Administration, Public Retirement, and Veterans' Affairs Interim Committee

PO BOX 201706
Helena, MT 59620-1706
(406) 444-3064
FAX (406) 444-3036

56th Montana Legislature

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DON HARGROVE
GLENN A. ROUSH

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RESEARCH ANALYST
JOHN MacMASTER, ATTORNEY
DAVID NISS, ATTORNEY
JOANN JONES, SECRETARY

MINUTES

Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee
February 28, 2000
Montana Association of Counties
Helena, Montana

Please Note: These are summary minutes. Testimony and discussion are paraphrased and condensed. Committee tapes are on file in the offices of the Legislative Services Division. **Exhibits for this meeting are available upon request. Legislative Council policy requires a charge of 15 cents a page for copies of documents.**

COMMITTEE MEMBERS PRESENT

Sen. Don Hargrove, Chairman
Sen. Glenn A. Roush

Rep. Edith J. Clark
Rep. Carol Williams

STAFF PRESENT

Sheri Heffelfinger, Research Analyst
David Niss, Attorney
Jo Ann Jones, Secretary

VISITORS

Visitors' list, Attachment #1.

CALL TO ORDER AND ROLL CALL

Sen. Hargrove called the meeting to order at 8:30 a.m. Roll call was noted.

VETERANS' RESOURCE COALITION STATUS REPORT

Exhibit #1: Veterans' Resource Coalition (VRC) Status Report by Maj. Mary Kenison, Department of Military Affairs (DMA)

Exhibit #2: Shelter Listings

Exhibit #3: Community Cooperation Leads to Record Award for Homelessness

Exhibit #4: Job Seeker Services offered by the Helena Job Service Center and copy of 38 U.S.C. Chapter 41

Maj. Mary Kenison, Department of Military Affairs (DMA), discussed Exhibit #1.

Jim Nolan, Department of Public Health & Human Services (DPHHS), discussed Exhibits #1 and #2.

Bob Thornton, Helena Job Service, distributed and discussed Exhibit #4.

Rick Salyer, Homeless Task Force, said that he would be resigning as chairman in May. He said that he would be working closely with Tim Busby on the next Homeless StandDown. Mr. Salyer commented that the increase of awareness has been the most effective solution to the homeless issue.

Jim Jacobsen, Administrator, Montana Veterans' Affairs Division (MVAD), said the transportation issue between God's Love, a local homeless shelter, and the VA hospital has been resolved through the Disabled American Veterans (DAV) transportation system. Now the transportation bus makes several round trips daily, instead of just one.

Sen. Roush said the presentations were very informative and helpful. He said that the most positive result has been that agencies are now meeting and discussing the

issues. He asked how many homeless veterans there are in Montana. Mr. Salyer said that there are over 15 veterans camps between Garrison and Missoula, and approximately 70 homeless veterans living in the August area. The first Homeless StandDown consisted mainly of transients, but the second one brought more homeless veterans out of isolation. Mr. Thornton said that there may be a more accurate count of homeless veterans after the 2000 Census has been completed. He said that it must be remembered that many people are not homeless now, but are very close to homelessness. A common perception is that some more people are one paycheck away from homelessness, and he said that is a true statement.

Mike Hankins, President, Chapter 626, VietNam Veterans of America, said that he is very familiar with the Choteau/Augusta area, and said that there are 58 homeless veterans, mostly VietNam era, including men and women, living there. He estimated that, including family members, there are approximately 115 homeless people in that area, but only 19 attended the StandDown. He described the characteristics of the Choteau/Augusta homeless as some having been unemployed 25-30 years, some of the women are on welfare under other names, and some feel that they are fugitives from the law whether or not they actually are, and some want no contact with society at all.

Sen. Roush said that individuals must make an effort to seek help and the ones who will refuse to do so cannot be sought out individually. He asked Mr. Thornton if homeless people are regularly seen at the Montana Job Service. Mr. Thornton said that God's Love is located very close to the Helena Job Service office and there are usually approximately 15 people waiting at the door when the office opens at 7:00 a.m.

Sen. Roush asked Mr. Nolan to comment that there were reports that service was refused by DPHHS personnel when asked for mental health assistance. Mr. Nolan said

that, to his knowledge, it has never occurred. He said that he would welcome being informed if the Subcommittee has a specific instance because the failure to assist in those circumstances is unconscionable.

Rep. Williams asked if there had been an increase in service to homeless veterans by the MVAD during the past year. Mr. Jacobsen said that 25 homeless veterans received direct assistance from the MVAD offices last year; many others were referred on to other agencies, but statistics are not kept on those. He said that approximately 10 individuals asked for MVAD help during the last StandDown.

Sen. Hargrove said that the Helena Area Resources Guide mentioned by Maj. Kenison is a valuable tool, but that the concept should be expanded to a Montana Resources Guide. He asked Maj. Kenison if the FTEs required to administer the grants that she mentioned will be provided through the grants themselves. Maj. Kenison replied that there is still a question of which agency will administer the grants, but said that one grant will be used to purchase a handicapped-accessible van, and the other grant will be used to hire a comprehensive case manager. She said that she would like the grants to be as all-encompassing as possible.

Mr. Salyer said that he will be taking an idea to the DAV convention in May that is similar to a project in Washington. He said that a resource van is used for outreach to individuals in wilderness area.

Mr. Thornton said that, a couple of years ago, grant money was used to purchase a laptop computer for the Veterans' Outreach Officer to use in the field.

Michael O'Neill, Golden Triangle Mental Health Center, said a vital piece of any endeavor is a vital, active outreach.

Sen. Hargrove asked Maj. Kenison to keep the Subcommittee informed of any new developments.

Sen. Hargrove asked Mr. Thornton if he had a success rate in finding employment for veterans to report to the Subcommittee. Mr. Thornton said there is a very high success rate, but it may not be instantaneous because not many employees stand by to hold positions open specifically for veterans. Sen. Hargrove asked if the Montana Job Service tracks recidivism. Mr. Thornton replied that, although the recidivism rate is not tracked, he knows that it occurs.

Sen. Hargrove said that outreach must be done, but it must be kept in mind that individuals have a right to live in the wilderness and have little or no contact with society, if they choose to do so. He said that although this lifestyle may not agree with the conceptions of the most of the society, choosing to live this way is not in itself an indicator of mental illness.

VA HOSPITAL UPDATE

Joe Underkofler, Director, Ft. Harrison VA Center, said that integration with the Miles City facility has been completed, and there are now contract clinics in Glasgow and Sidney. He said that next year, the loop of services will be closed on the hi-line. The goal for the future is to use local, private services as much as possible. This will allow for the reduction or alteration of 33 positions that are redundant, allowing for the redirection of \$1.3 million in resources to other programs. He said that the Transitional Assistance Program, a counseling service at Malmstrom Air Force Base for individuals who are leaving military service, will continue to be expanded. The VA is also increasing the number of counselors for the rehabilitation counseling program.

Mr. Underkofler reported that there are 87,000 to 90,000 veterans in Montana; over 27,000 are enrolled in the VA health program. He said the national average is 10% of

the total veteran population, but Montana's ratio of veterans enrolled in health programs to total veteran population is approximately 25%.

Mr. Underkofler said some of the changes in veteran benefits include allowing VA facilities to provide prescriptions to certain veterans who are residing in veterans' homes, by authority of the Undersecretary for Health. The Millennium Health Care Act extends the eligibility for nursing home care in the VA by allowing the VA to decrease coverage to 70%, allowing more veterans to participate. The Act also allows emergency care received at hospitals outside of the VA to be reimbursed.

Mr. Underkofler said that pregnancy has now been recognized as a medical condition and care can be provided to veterans. He said there is now screening and testing for Hepatitis C and a controversial treatment that has had mixed success.

Mr. Underkofler said the Miles city facility consists of 125,000 square feet, but only 25,000 square feet is required to operate a nursing home and out-patient clinic. He said maintaining the building is burdensome and the county will pursue federal legislation to acquire the building, retaining the VA center as the anchor tenant. The result from not having to maintain the building any longer would be an additional \$500-\$600 million to revert into health care.

Sen. Hargrove asked if the Miles City facility has an Alzheimer's unit. Mr. Underkofler said there are no Alzheimer's units in the state except for those at private facilities. Alzheimer's patients are now in standard nursing homes, if possible. The VA used to send those patients to Ft. Lyon, Colorado, but that facility is in the process of being converted to a prison facility for geriatric and mentally infirm prisoners. He said the VA now sends Alzheimer's patients to Sheridan, Wyoming. Mr. Jacobsen said the Columbia Falls facility has gotten approval for an Alzheimer's wing, and Glendive has 10 beds dedicated for Alzheimer's patients.

Sen. Hargrove asked what the eligibility requirement is for basic medical services. Mr. Underkofler said just being a veteran, the only restrictions are on dental and nursing home care.

John DenHerder, East Helena, asked Mr. Underkofler several specific questions related to the provisions of the Millennium Health Care Act.

Herb Ballou, Military Order of the Purple Heart representative at Ft. Harrison, said that Purple Heart veterans were removed from the system in 1998, but the Millennium Health Care Act placed these veterans back into the system. He commented that although Purple Heart veterans now have priority again, they don't yet have a local veterans' home facility and strongly encouraged the Subcommittee to consider its development as a priority issue. Mr. Underkofler said that in 1997, Purple Heart veterans were recognized for their service instead of as a specific group. He said the assumption was that a Purple Heart veteran would be in the top priority group anyway and it was not necessary to isolate them as a priority group. The Millennium Health Care Act merely reestablished the Purple Heart veterans as a recognized group.

Sen. Roush asked if walk-in patients were a problem. Mr. Underkofler said that walk-in patients are evaluated by a nurse. If the situation demands, the veteran will receive immediate care. If it's not an emergency, then the patient has to wait for an opening to see a doctor. If an opening does not arise that same day, the patient may have to wait until the next day.

HUNTING AND FISHING LICENSE LAWS

Exhibit #5: Montana Resident Fish and Game Hunting License Requirement Violations by Armed Forces Members Holding or Applying for a License From Another State

David Niss, staff attorney, said the issue discussed in Exhibit #5 arose from a member of the armed forces having been charged with fraudulently obtaining a Montana fish

and game hunting license. He said that Montana statute does not allow anyone to obtain a Montana resident license if that individual has obtained a resident license in another state.

Bob Lane, Fish Wildlife & Parks, said the case under investigation has other facts not yet brought out. He said the real issue is the statute that prohibits utilizing resident licenses in other states if the individual is legally a resident of Montana. He said that if, in the case of a member of the military, the only option available to hunt or fish in another state is a resident license, the Department would be willing to clarify the language of 87-102-4(d), because prohibition of hunting privileges in other states was not the intention of the law.

Sen. Hargrove said that the 1997 Legislature passed a bill stating that if a person is resident of Montana in one circumstance, that person is a resident in all circumstances, and it may make 87-102-4(d) superfluous. He said that no one is forced to hunt or fish in another state as a resident, and one may purchase a non-resident license to guarantee continuation of resident privileges in Montana.

Mr. Lane said that the only fishing or hunting licenses made available to military personnel in some other states may be a resident license; if so, then the situation is not fair because the individual cannot purchase a non-resident license in order to comply with the law.

Sen. Hargrove asked for Subcommittee consensus for the Department to examine the issue.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Mr. DenHerder said that Montana should consider giving military personnel a 30-day honorarium to hunt and fish while they are home on leave.

Mr. Ballou reiterated his concern for the need of a nursing home at the Ft. Harrison facility.

OTHER BUSINESS

Sen. Hargrove said the veteran population is aging and is an issue that merits attention. He asked for input. Mr. Jacobsen said the overall health care picture is moving toward outpatient services. He said that Montana has regularly sent a resolution to Congress asking for a nursing home facility at Ft. Harrison. He suggested Mr. Hanshew from DPHHS address the next subcommittee meeting. He said that a dedicated veterans' nursing home facility at Ft. Harrison is a difficult issue because civilian nursing homes around the state have empty beds.

Sheri Heffelfinger, staff, asked for identification of issues to be put on the March agenda. Those issues include: a briefing by Joe Underkofler and Mike Hanshew on nursing homes, an update by Maj. Kenison about VRC activities, and a report from Fish, Wildlife, and Parks on the fishing and hunting licenses issue.

Sen. Hargrove asked for Subcommittee input on the issue of providing services to homeless veterans who do not seem to want it. Rep. Clark said that the state can only make the information on assistance available, but it is the individual's decision whether that assistance is wanted. Rep. Williams said that outreach efforts, however, must be extended.

Rep. Clark said that, initially, contact with the homeless must be made simpler. She said that hot soup and antibiotics will build trust faster than showing the homeless what programs are available to them if they travel to Helena.

Sen. Roush requested that Ms. Heffelfinger investigate what type of resource van that Washington uses, and also what other states may be doing for outreach programs.

Sen. Hargrove said that he did not think it necessary for the Subcommittee to meet before May. Rep. Williams said that she would like to receive information on Maj. Kenison's activities before the May meeting.

ADJOURNMENT

There being no further business to come before the Subcommittee, the meeting was adjourned at 11:55 a.m.

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